



Charles de Steuben's 1837 painting of the battle of Tours depicts the triumphant Charles Martel, battle axe held high, riding a white horse towards the Arab army as it falls back in disarray

10 October AD 732

Franks crush Arabs at Tours

The Islamic armies' relentless advance is brought to a halt

In the first decades of the eighth century, the armies of Islam swept like a storm through the Iberian peninsula. By 716 they had taken the cities of Catalonia and were moving north towards the Pyrenees. Five years later they were besieging Toulouse, and by 725 they had reached Burgundy. In under a century they had conquered the Middle East,

north Africa, Spain and Portugal. Now it seemed France was theirs for the taking.

At the beginning of October 732, advancing towards the city of Tours, the invaders were stunned to see tens of thousands of Frankish troops drawn up for battle between Tours and Poitiers. At their head was Charles Martel, duke and prince of the Franks, who had decided to stake everything on a set-piece confrontation.

For seven days the two armies sparred. At last, on 10 October, the Arab commander, Abd-al-Rahman, lost patience and ordered his cavalry to attack the Frankish infantry square. But, as an Arab chronicler later put it, "in the shock of the battle the men of the north seemed like a sea that cannot be moved. Firmly they stood, one close to another,

forming as it were a bulwark of ice; and with great blows of their swords they hewed down the Arabs."

When Abd-al-Rahman was struck down, the Arabs lost their nerve. The battle was lost and, over the next few years, Charles steadily drove the Arabs back towards the Pyrenees.

Centuries later, historians came to see the battle of Tours as a major turning point. As Edward Gibbon famously put it, had the invaders won, their ships might have sailed unchallenged into the mouth of the Thames. "Perhaps," he mischievously wrote, "the interpretation of the Koran would now be taught in the schools of Oxford, and her pulpits might demonstrate to a circumcised people the sanctity and truth of the revelation of Mahomet".